

Walking in step with the Spirit!

It is said, 'Truth is often stranger than fiction'.

I wonder how the folks in Jerusalem would have reacted when they heard what Philip had been up to!

You what? eh?

Angels spoke to you? An Ethiopian Eunuch?
Baptised? You left him there?

We might feel the same. Somewhat cynical! Even feeling this is completely other than what we experience today so it must be fanciful or mythical.

Open your bibles with me and let's think about it together and see if some of our questions about this passage and the bible in general are answered.

What are we seeing here?

We are witnessing the growth of the Church from Jerusalem, out through Judea and Samaria and now to Africa

Acts 8:26 ²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

In these chapters there is intense spiritual activity. The church is in a fledgling state. There is a cluster

of miraculous signs at this time to support this new message and these new messengers from God. And there are angelic visitations.

There are two things I want to say about this. Luke is condensing and selecting material. Some people in his account have angelic encounters but not all. I bet some people were thinking as Philip reported all that had happened. "You saw an angel, wish I could see one".

One of my bosses when I worked for UCCF used to be a missionary with Operation Mobilisation. He said that when they were working in Africa bringing the gospel to tribes that had never heard the gospel they encountered a tribe who were expecting them. They were asked by the missionaries who told them. 'Oh, the men in shiny coats! No-one from the team had been before. The only conclusions were it was angels!'

So instructed Philip is off down the Gaza road. And it is there that we see God at work in the incidentals.

Philip and the incidentals

Acts 8:27-28 ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet.

Philip is clearly being called to be an evangelist. Those gifted at communicating the gospel in such a way that they are the ones God uses to bring people to faith. Now it is said that in any congregation 10% are gifted that way. How they know that I don't know but if so there are 10-12 of you here!

Though we may not be gifted in the same way as Philip we can learn a lot from him.

Firstly he is willing to be moved out of his comfort zone. It could have been seen as an inconvenience to head for Gaza. All his friends were in Jerusalem, lots of exciting things were happening there. But he was willing to go despite personal inconvenience.

In general society today there is a general lack of willingness to volunteer for anything. I was recently speaking to someone from the council who was lamenting the fact that they cannot get volunteers to run things. People want to see the council deal with issues like youth but without community help and involvement they cannot do it.

We live in a society that does not in the main tolerate personal inconvenience don't we? Unless it is directly benefiting us we are not really that interested. The same issue is mirrored in the wider church. The church is largely a voluntary organisation. It relies on people hearing God's promptings and being prepared to be moved out of

their comfort zones and take some personal inconvenience in order to survive.

I think this church is quite good as far as folks volunteering is concerned but the folks volunteering are aging. We are in the fortunate position where our fellowship is being replenished with younger folks. We as the younger generations are going to have to be prepared to take up more of the responsibility in time. And it will be inconvenient and push us out of our comfort zones. But the truth of the matter is that the Lord honours those who honour him. So as we give ourselves to his service the Lord will give to us – strength, help and more.

I know how I feel on a Thursday night before going to the football. Every night I think Oh man I am too tired for this tonight. But I go and am glad I have gone when I go home. The boys appreciate it. Admire folks like Moyen and Eon who have volunteered with youth organisations for many years. They are an example to us.

But I suppose it is not just about volunteering, there are other things that we do as a church that will benefit you greatly in your faith eg House Groups, the forth coming evening service. It takes a bit of effort to go to things like this but I think the universal testimony for those who go is that they benefit from them greatly.

Back to Philip. He is horsing on, down the road to Gaza vs 27. You can imagine what could possibly happen. He's stomping on down the road – maybe daydreaming a bit. Thinking about what has God in store in Gaza. He passes a rich, important looking coloured chap with his entourage. Maybe thinks – mmmh, I could do with a chariot like that right now. And walks on by chastising himself for coveting! Gotta get to Gaza.

Hold the phone! Of course that is not what happens but it is easily what could have happened. Philip could have thought. That guy is too important for me to approach.

It would be like you or I passing someone like Kofi Annan whilst he is waiting outside a hotel for his car and seeing him maybe reading a bit from the bible. Would you stop knowing he had bodyguards?

Philip may not have but for one thing.

Acts 8:29 ²⁹ *The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."*

How did he know it was the Spirit? Well maybe he was unsure but did it anyway and after the fact could say for sure it was. Did it come in the form of that prompting you sometimes feel? You know the kind of thing. A person comes to mind a bit out of the blue – pray for them, visit them, phone them. Something is

said in a meeting or conversation and you know instantly it is of the Lord.

We may be busy doing something else but it is sometimes these incidentals that God uses most powerfully.

We need to learn what is the voice of God prompting by his Spirit and what is not. That comes by trial and error. Like fine tuning a radio to get just the perfect signal. It comes by reading and learning from the Word of God – because that is where his voice is most clearly heard and his will most clearly expressed.

Moving on, I love this next bit.

We find Philip explaining the gospel

Philip and the Gospel

Acts 8:30-35 ³⁰ *Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. ³¹ "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." ³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

Philip knew the good news about Jesus because he was experiencing and living it. He also knew how to explain it. Not in a packaged way but starting with the very issues that the man had.

But Philip is again breaking new ground for the church. This man is a eunuch. It was the practice of ancient cultures to castrate royal servants, usually around the age of 12, so that they would not be distracted by affairs of the heart.

A eunuch however would not be allowed into the temple in Jerusalem – this kind of mutilation not permitted in the Jewish law. So this man could only have been what we might term a gentile God fearer. Who followed the tenants of Judaism but could not participate fully.

But he wants to follow God. He has bought a expensive scroll which contains a section from the book of Isaiah. It maybe he bought that particular section because it contained chapter 56:3-6

Isaiah 56:3-6 ³Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." And let not any eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." ⁴For this is what the LORD says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant-- ⁵to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off. ⁶And foreigners who bind themselves to the

LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant--

This passage would have given him hope. But in order to have that passage he would have had to buy a scroll that contained a much larger section of Isaiah

Which contains this section from the wonderful chapter 53. Which speaks of Jesus hundreds of years before he come. It is a prophecy of his death on a cross through which everyone foreigners like us and eunachs would be able to know God.

I can't help but ask you to turn with me to Isaiah 53 p. 740 to look at this passage Philip and the Ethiopian looked at that day.. It is like holy ground to me. I have mentioned before that it was through this passage in scripture that I really understood why Jesus came and died on the cross. At the age of 17 sitting at on the very back pew between my mother and father I listened to the shouty and passionate new minister preach on it and it was as if ear muffs had been lifted of my ears. And God was saying 'Get a load of this Calum'.

Isaiah is seeing and interpreting what is happening on the cross. Maybe this is also something like how Philip explained the gospel to the Ethiopian.

Think of the cross as we read this:

Isaiah 53:3-5 *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

Approaching the cross Jesus was indeed a man of sorrows, despised and rejected by all – even his closest friends!

What was really going on?

⁴ *Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.* ⁵ *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

We cannot make up to God for all our wrong doing. So God made it up for us. The Son agreeing to take the punishment for our sins. The God-man Jesus bearing the wrath of God so we could know the peace of God.

It is not a comfortable thought is it?

Isaiah 53:6 ⁶ *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

At the beginning of the new Millennium the pop singer Robbie Williams wrote a song called Millennium. In which he describes my generation.

*Live for liposuction
detax for your 'rents*

*overdose for Christmas and give it up for Lent
My friends are all so cynical refuse to keep the faith
We all enjoy the madness 'cause we know we're gonna fade away.*

*We've got stars directing our fate
and we're praying it's not too late
'cause we know we're falling from grace
Millennium*

The thing that struck me was that he was openly acknowledging a self consciousness of falling from grace – a sinner in the sight of God!

Jesus died for sinners, for our forgiveness and restoration. Jesus died so that all peoples of all races and generations could come and know forgiveness and restoration. Could come near to God.

You can imagine that this Ethiopians ears would pick up at that! What? **All** peoples come to God. This man in Isaiah 53 is he is the one who makes the things in chapter 56 possible? Yes, says Philip. The penny drops for the Ethiopian. God does love me. He has overcome my inadequacies. Jesus died so that I can know and love God. That I can follow him.

Now please. Can I have this now!
Yes I put my faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the one long prophesied. Yes I receive Jesus as Lord of my life. Yes I give myself to follow him.

Picture the scene. This rich, prestigious, important figure. The Chancellor of the Exchequer of Ethiopia. In all his finery. Has spotted some water. The servants are already a bit confused why he is speaking to this commoner? What's he doing now? He's getting of the chariot. shouting. Pull at the horses all stop. What is he shouting?

Acts 8:36-38 ³⁶ As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptised?" ³⁷ ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot.

He shouts. "Stop the chariot". Here's water let me be baptized as the sign of my allegiance to Jesus and the forgiveness of my sins." "Lord I am coming!" "Let me draw close to you"

Philip. Maybe a bit embarrassed as everyone there is staring at him as if their boss has gone stir crazy!

Splash. He's in the water waiting for Philip.

He is already sensing in his Spirit a new thing. Forgiveness. Love. Acceptance.

Is that how it happened? Maybe?

Luke in presenting this material to us is reminding us that this new faith of the Ethiopian is available to all who will put their faith in Jesus. He died for you and me as well.

But vs 39 we are left with the picture of the Ethiopian heading of in his chariot rejoicing. The first black gospel singer!

There is a mystery here though. Somehow when people hear the gospel it changes lives. It did then and it does now. I've seen it. Not everyone and not all the time. But when the time is right people enter into a new relationship with God or what seems like a renewed relationship and understanding of God.

So we need to get the gospel heard. We can either explain it to folks ourselves in word and deed or bring them to places where they see the gospel lived, believed, proclaimed and practiced. Church services, Church events, Christianity Explored, Sunday School, Holiday Club, Scripture Union group, Tuesday Group, Guild, Boys Brigade and the like.

Who can we invite? Friends, family, children, grandchildren if they live nearby, colleagues if you work in Stirling, fellow bowlers, folks at classes you attend, neighbours.

I am sure many of you have invited folks like that. But the thing is not to give up. We will hopefully have other things on that people will want to come to in the future. Always think – who could I invite to this?

It is a wee bit uncomfortable maybe but for every 10 people you ask maybe at least one will come and keep coming. Philip was prepared to be moved out

of his comfort zone and saw the Lord work through him.

Let me finish with this story. You have heard me tell of Graeme who whilst hitchhiking kept being picked up by Christians who told him about the love of God. So much so that when he moved to Skye he was ready to hear more and became a Christian. That same summer when up in Skye Moira-Anne and I were living in a flat above a house. A couple owned it. The wife was a Christian but the husband wasn't. One day whilst having a look at his computer we got chatting. It was clear God was also on his case. I helped explain what was happening to him and from that week on he became a committed Christian.

That summer we also ran a Youth Cafe in the local hall. Each night there would be a short presentation of the faith. Near the end of the summer I asked at the end of the gospel presentation if anyone had been thinking about becoming a Christian and if so then come and speak to me. Young Neil came and spoke to me. In the hall kitchen I explained what it meant to become a Christian and by God's grace he received Jesus as his saviour and Lord.

I was an extra ordinary 3 months. When people who are not Christians come in contact with the gospel – it might be for the first time or the 50th or 500th time. Something happens. Either they are moved to a position closer to receiving Jesus or they harden their hearts to him.

Let's be a gospel proclaiming church and people. Open to the prompting of the Spirit and though we may not see folks pouring through the door professing faith we may see, and Lord may it be so, them coming in ones and two's gradually and more increasingly.